

## ICT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL. CALL – COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The paper will explore CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) in Portugal, focusing on higher education level. The lack of exploitation of CALL in PT is well-documented in several reports, e.g. The EU commissioned report “The Impact of Information and Communications Technologies on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and on the Role of Teachers of Foreign Languages” (2002: 5): “The use and employment of ICT in FLT and FLL is far from satisfactory, as ICT resources are traditionally reserved for ‘(computer) science’ subjects, and rarely assigned to arts subjects. A general lack of appropriate training of language teachers in meaningful uses of ICT tends to strengthen this trend”. The paper will address these needs by focusing results from European projects like POOLS. We’ll deal with questions concerning online materials that can be used for developing language lesson contents making use of the advantages of *e-Learning* and questions on teaching the less taught languages to use.

**KEYWORDS:** CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning), ICT, FLT (Foreign Language Teaching), (FLL) Foreign Language Learning.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende explorar el Aprendizaje de Lenguas Asistido por Ordenador (CALL, Computer-Assisted Language Learning) en Portugal. Para ello, se centrará en el nivel de educación superior. La escasa explotación del CALL en Portugal ha sido ampliamente estudiado en varios informes, por ejemplo, el informe encargado por la UE titulado *The Impact of Information and Communications Technologies on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and on the Role of Teachers of Foreign Languages* (2002: 5): “The use and employment of ICT in FLT

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and FLL is far from satisfactory, as ICT resources are traditionally reserved for ‘(computer) science’ subjects, and rarely assigned to arts subjects. A general lack of appropriate training of language teachers in meaningful uses of ICT tends to strengthen this trend”. Este artículo abordará dichas necesidades centrándose en los resultados de proyectos europeos como POOLS. Analizaremos cuestiones relativas a los materiales en línea que pueden utilizarse para desarrollar contenidos de clases de lengua, haciendo uso de las ventajas del *e-Learning*.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Aprendizaje de Lenguas asistido por ordenador (CALL), TIC, Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (FLT), Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras (FLL)

## INTRODUCTION TO COMPUTER ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING - CALL

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is often considered a language teaching method, however, this is not really the case. In traditional CALL the methodology was often claimed to be based on a behaviouristic approach as in “programmable teaching” where the computer checked the student input and gave feedback (reward?)/moved on to an appropriate activity exercise. In modern CALL the emphasis is on communication and tasks.

The role of the computer in CALL has moved from the “input – control – feedback” sequence to management of communication, text, audio, and video. Few people may realise that a DVD player in reality is a computer. Future domestic appliances will integrate and merge video, television, audio, telephone, graphics, text, and Internet into one unit as can in 2010 be seen on newer generations of “mobile telephones / communicators”.

How do we use CALL for teaching e.g. the less widely used and taught languages? The starting point should not be that students sit at computers to learn a language. The starting point should rather be that students are learning a language and as part of that process sometimes sit at computers.

When planning to use CALL it is important to understand how a language is learned; language learning is a cognitive process, i.e. it is the result of the student’s own processing of language inputs. What is learned is mainly the result of this process and not just explanations, rules, and questions presented by a teacher or a computer. Based on his/her existing knowledge on the topic being worked on, language, and language acquisition the student processes the input and fits it into the language system he/she possesses. Language knowledge is not just recorded, but rather constructed by the student.

One of the worst fears when dealing with CALL and distance / online learning has always been the social aspect. It has been believed that the computer mediated community would imply some lack of social relations. However, several presentations at EUROCALL2 conventions have revealed that distance learning classes using audio conferencing actually developed a strong sense of social community. (E.g. "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Teacher: The Role of Social Presence in the Online Classroom." by Tammelin Maija from the Helsinki School of Economics, Helsinki, Finland and another presentation "Fostering (pro)active language learning through MOO" by Lesley Shield, Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom).

CALL offers the language teacher and learner a number of activities that when carefully planned as part of the pedagogical room will help the learner learn a language. The following pages present an alphabetically ordered list of sample activities.

## POOLS-2

The aim of this paper is to explore the use of blended learning approach in the classroom in Higher education institutions in Portugal. We'll take as an example what can be done in the teaching of Languages using CALL methodology describing the POOLS project.

Pools-2, Universidade de Évora takes part as a representative of Portugal, is a Leonardo supported TOI (Transfer Of Innovation) project based on the POOLS project (2005-2007). POOLS was in 2009 awarded the Leonardo da Vinci silver medal for innovation and creativity.

### POOLS created:

- a digital library with videos teaching languages, each video is transcribed and graded to match students according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
- a teacher course on how to develop materials for computer assisted language learning
- a teacher course on computer assisted language learning methodology
- a course book and Do It Yourself videos showing how to develop online materials

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eurocall-languages.org/> a European language teachers' organisation dealing with ICT and language teaching

Pools has got a website that serves as a portal and link to all the project results. From the website we have access to copyleft language teaching materials and teacher manuals that each teacher can include in his own classes.

The lack of exploitation of CALL in Portugal is well documented in several reports, e.g. The EU commissioned report *The Impact of Information and Communications Technologies on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and on the Role of Teachers of Foreign Languages* (2002: 5): «The use and deployment of ICT in FLT and FLL is far from satisfactory, as ICT resources are traditionally reserved for ‘(computer) science’ subjects, and rarely assigned to arts subjects. A general lack of appropriate training of language teachers in meaningful uses of ICT tends to strengthen this trend».

The project POOLS2 will address these needs by transferring the results from POOLS to Cyprus, Malta, and Portugal which will result in online materials that can be used for developing language lesson contents utilizing the advantages of eLearning and enable teachers of the less taught languages to use ICT in their lessons.

The TOI will transfer the POOLS results by adapting and translating the core materials (course book, course manuals, and the DIY video subtitles), produce digital videos for use in CALL materials development in the three new languages, and run a sequence of teacher training courses on CALL.

The POOLS2 project consortium comprises VET colleges, universities, and organizations from BE, CY, DK, ES, MT, PT and UK all involved in language teaching. The UK partner was the coordinator of the POOLS project.

The main transfer of innovation is a geographic and language move towards three new countries and three more languages which mean that the project target group from the project website can download materials in their own national languages resulting in a new total of materials in twelve European languages in the website (present status is nine languages). The transfer of innovation is not just a translation and adaptation exercise; after adapting the POOLS core outcomes course participants from the CY, MT, and PT teams will be coached in video recording and editing techniques, in software production, and in CALL methodologies suitable for CLIL – Content Language Integrated Learning and Task based learning. The course participants will then produce videos that can be used in multimedia applications for teaching Portuguese. When the videos are ready the teams run similar courses in their countries. The first course in each country is peer reviewed by teams from the original POOLS partnership (ES and DK). The courses will then be adapted following the recommendations from the peer review and further piloted in the second project year in different regions of the three countries to ensure exploitation of the results and value for money. Each course will be

evaluated and the compiled recommendations and feed-back will result in the final project course book and materials at the end of the project funded period.

## E-LEARNING COURSES FOR TEACHERS

CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) is a great possibility to make language classes more engaging and lively but it requires the language teachers to become computer literates.

### TEACHING TEACHERS

The course modules, (or most of them), can be offered as online courses, class courses, or blended courses. It seems suitable to offer some of the modules en bloc e.g. several modules have familiar features and required competences like the Hot Potatoes modules. This enables the teacher to provide tailor made courses catered to the varied learning styles and needs of the varied professional client groups.

To achieve a manageable, or profitable, number of participants for each course it is likely to be of benefit to offer a suite of modules so that the individual participant can have a pick at the modules she favours and still to have a reasonable number of participants for each module.

It appears to be good practice to offer the modules based on the competencies that can be achieved by completing them e.g. the module “Creating Crossword Exercises” could be offered with the following description: “The course enables the participant to create crossword puzzles that can be made available online or can be printed out.”

Course participants are immediately presented with a concrete example of the skills which they can gain, which is motivating and clear.

Additionally, share stories of educational/ classroom experiences which have inspired you to use the approach yourself and how your students have benefited e.g. how are you making use of mobile phones to make instruction videos and why a video is a useful instrument for the students. In other words, lead by example.

Most teachers have knowledge and understanding of the content which they wish to share and want more time to have individual contact with students. If you can assist them to see the timesaving / contact benefits of these methods, that can be inspiring for the busy teacher. It is useful to focus on the practical benefits to be gained from using these new methods, “the first pain (in learning the methods) then gain approach’ as they say at your local health/ sports club.

## PRE-COURSE ACTIVITIES

For most of the modules it may be of benefit to set up a facebook group, a blog, or a website area for presenting the participants' outputs so these can be presented to and commented by other participants.

In case of online or blended courses it's probably necessary to set up some sort of a communication platform for the groups e.g. First Class, Moodle, Fronter, or BlackBoard . A simple e-mail list may, however, serve the same purpose.

If it is intended to use a communication platform during the course then the participants will need some instruction in order to use the chosen platform, i.e. unless it has been decided only to use e-mail.

## COURSE DELIVERY

The best delivery schedule is to have modules dealing with inspirational actual content development or content production like video, audio (e.g. inspiring music), graphics and hyperlinked text precede modules that deal with development of exercises. Think of what would appeal to **you** on a wet January afternoon and you'll be on the right lines.

## CLASS COURSES

Class courses based on manageable groups do not necessarily differ from any other taught course. Obviously the teacher needs to "know her stuff" and be reasonably experienced in delivering courses to other teachers.

The approach should not be a step by step instructional lesson, but should start with the group / class deciding what they would like to achieve and which competencies need to be mastered within that context e.g. a class teacher on a catering course with one computer in her classroom might wish to start with crossword exercises on food vocabulary which can be photocopied and supplied manually to students.

It is then necessary to generate the awareness that hot potatoes crosswords can be helpful to the needs of her course. Based on the envisaged output the course can take a constructivist approach towards that goal with the course teacher/instructor assisting whenever the need occurs, i.e. "Just In Time Teaching".

## ONLINE COURSES

Online courses are frequently too individual, to cater for a social setting/ group feeling which can be isolating, for certain participants. It is therefore recommended that the participants write a short presentation of themselves with e-mail addresses. The presentations are shared either in an online forum or by e-mail. It is then possible for two or more participants to share their ideas and work together toward the envisaged outputs. This provides an on-line support system while learning. It has proven to be a benefit to enable the participants to communicate with one another using voice mail, Skype and / or MS messenger, or with the use of web cameras. This approach has been used by the British Open University for a number of years. Of course some instruction on how to use these communication methods should be provided.

The course participants should be sent clear and transparent instructions, work tasks, and time schedules, so they know the expected input from each participant.

The teacher / instructor needs to understand the importance of writing timely feed-back and comments to participants thus basing the method on a coaching approach. All over Europe this approach is being developed in eLearning. This is particularly important for those who are inspired by verbal/ image information or are visual learners.

Experience has shown that the amount of time that should be given the teacher per student for preparation and feedback exceeds the time used for class room teaching by something like 50%. This may seem like a bad bargain for the offering institution, but the advantages like asynchronous teaching, no need for a class room, no travelling etc. are worth it, and also when dealing with computer assisted language learning, all participants and teachers should experience online learning/teaching.

Participants will benefit most from concrete examples from current practitioners relating to blended learning and from methods which get people excited. Some Pools participants in Spain launched a video making competition with a prize for the best being a video camera, very creative and great marketing for these methods.

## BLENDED COURSES

All of the above comments will already be sending you the message that the ideal structure for a successful blended course is to start and finish

with a classroom session where participants get to meet, depending on the module content, with a few classroom lessons in between the online work.

This fits with the competency oriented approach described above. The use of a variety of styles helps meet the needs of learners with different learning styles and will therefore increase the chance of success of your courses, measurable by the degree to which the methods taught are later integrated into the live teaching programme. A follow up questionnaire can help test their effectiveness. In any case research shows that a mix of learning styles is the most effective.

Helping the learner (professional) to inspire others can lead to a life long learning system and self motivated students, teachers and local groups with a much higher potential for spreading their inspiration to others through their local agencies. Enthusiasm is infectious. If people see how these methods can help them have more effective lessons and more individual coaching time with students, it can lead to a breakthrough in take up.

## COMPLETION

All of us like a pat on the back, so don't forget to send a congratulatory note, a fun certificate or even an on line gold star when participants have mastered a skill. On line presentations of Good Practice to be commented on by other participants can be rewarding. If anyone has suggestions for ways to how to hold an on line celebratory party, with cyberspace glasses of wine on offer please let the editor know...no seriously, we all like to have fun so let us work on that.

## A SAMPLE COURSE

During the pilot phase of the POOLS project we delivered an online methodology course titled "Computer Assisted Language Teaching put into a Task Based context". The course is delivered using a web based platform and also through e-mail where all participants receive "carbon copies". We put an emphasis on the value of having the participants give feed-back to one another.

There are seven tasks for the course participants:

Task 1: Send in a presentation of yourself

Deadline:

Task 2: Read the chapter about task based learning and CALL

Deadline:



Task 3: Develop your own task based activity with a pre-task, the main task and language consciousness raising activities. It must be one that you can use with one of your classes. Send in your task activity.

Deadline:

Task 4: Read and comment on the input from the other participants in the course. Give them feed back on their task activity.

Deadline:

Task 5: Try out the task activity in one of your classes.

Deadline:

Task 6: Send in a description of the students' reactions and evaluation of the task activity. Include also your own evaluation of the task.

Deadline: maximum two days after the task activity with a class.

Task 7: Read the evaluations of the other course participant and give feed back.

Deadline: Feed back must be given to each participant no later than a week after the respective evaluations have been submitted.

Task 8: Final evaluation and reflection.

How did you find the process of working with a new task activity?

Has it changed anything for you as a language teacher?

## CONCLUSION

The students process the L2 input, adapting it to their own language system. The linguistic knowledge is not only *recorded*, but most specially *built in*. The four skills will be developed having in mind an interactive learning environment, where students will have access to real language and to real cultural material.

Pools-2 intends to explore and disseminate language learning units in the countries where the ICT implementation is not yet developed. Therefore we intend to invert this tendency and disseminate the use of ICT in the Portuguese school system.

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